

Andy Wilf

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
July 14–August 14, 1983



Preface

In 1981, Andy Wilf became the 49th recipient of the Modern and Contemporary Art Council's Young Talent Purchase Award. When his name was announced at the prize reception, tumultuous applause broke out among the scores of artists present. In the degree of its intensity, this response, virtually unprecedented in my experience, both reflected the artist's own volatile and highly emotional nature and clearly revealed his charismatic effect on others. When an artist of Wilf's gifts and presence lives a dangerous, reckless existence, his legacy is likely to be restricted to a romantic, cultic legend. In Wilf's case, this distorting process has already begun to occur due to the artist's tragic death many years before his time. In order to set the record straight, we asked art critic Suzanne Muchnic to develop a reliable first sketch of the artist's evolution. I am grateful to Ms.

Muchnic for her contribution, a careful chronology of the signal facts of Wilf's short life and career. Even this necessarily brief account reveals that Wilf was a born artist. Versed in art history to some degree and voraciously interested in contemporary art, he was not at all the uninformed naïf. On the contrary, his late paintings—the meat still lifes, raw and emotional exclamations which brought him renown—were the result of years of patient work in another, much more subdued manner.

Ms. Muchnic and I are grateful to the many persons who have shared their memories of Andy Wilf with us: Harland Braun, Dan Douke, Hunter Drohojowska, Andrew Fabricant, D. J. Hall, Victor Lance Henderson, Charles Christopher Hill, Ulrike Kantor, Dr. Ann Thiel, Cynthia Kelly Thiel, Sally Roberts, Carey Wilf, and Mrs. Lucille Wilf. Quotations in Ms. Muchnic's chronology were drawn from interviews with these individuals. Curatorial Assistant Stella Paul worked closely with me on the catalogue and installation. Senior Conservator William Leisher was especially helpful in matters pertaining to the transport of the exceedingly fragile paintings in this show. Head Publications Editor Andrea P. A. Belloli worked on the catalogue manuscript from copy typed by former Department Secretary Cathy Bloome. Summer volunteer Putter Pence assisted in catalogue documentation and preparation for the press. Finally, free-lance designer Lawrence Levy created the new format for this publication, along with that for the concurrent exhibition *Italo Scanga, Heads*, both part of the ongoing *Gallery 6* series.

This exhibition, along with a \$3,000 grant, is part of the Museum's Young Talent Award to Andy Wilf. Eight paintings from the last three years of the artist's life have been selected, together with the painting entitled *Judged* from the Museum's permanent collection, to provide a sense of the strength and originality of the artist's achievement. This modest show should not preclude a large retrospective at some future date. Certainly there are more discoveries to be made about the brilliant work of Andy Wilf.

—Maurice Tuchman
Senior Curator
Twentieth-Century Art



Photograph taken by the artist of a still life he had set up in his studio

Andy Wilf

by Suzanne Muchnic

- 1949 Born August 25 in Los Angeles to Philip and Lucille Wilf of Lynwood, CA. Parents are Mormons. Father is an electrician; mother, who studied art at UCLA as a young woman, later attends night school to learn to paint and subscribes to art publications. Older half-brother, Philip, Jr., is son of father by a former marriage.
- As a toddler, Wilf develops asthma, which plagues him throughout his life. Drugs administered to combat this predispose him to later drug abuse.
- 1953 Shows early aptitude for art. Family's home movies include footage of him drawing.
- 1957 Uses so much paper that his mother buys him rolls of shelf paper on which he draws complex battle scenes of cavalry, Indians, and foreshortened horses.
- 1960 Paints mural of scenes from California history at Wilson Elementary School in Lynwood and draws designs on friends' T-shirts.
- 1961–67 Continues to perfect drawing skill, but finds junior and senior high school art classes boring and does not get along with teachers.
- Develops interest in music and plays trumpet in All-City Band. Hampered by asthma, he changes to steel guitar.
- 1967 Graduates from Lynwood High School.
- 1968–71 Attends Compton College, then Long Beach City College, each for one semester.
- Sets up studio in room behind parents' home; when that becomes too small, converts storeroom in nearby Huntington Park into studio. In subsequent years, rents two other studios in the area, but maintains living quarters at parents' home until 1976.

- Works at Art Fair, a painting factory, first at plant in Compton, then in San Fernando Valley, then returns to Compton. Becomes very adept at turning out production-line paintings, but tells mother they are "junk." Friend at factory gives him his first stretched canvas.
- Begins to paint copies of works by Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns in his studio.
- 1972 For spring semester, enrolls in two painting classes through Otis Art Institute's extension program. Drops out of one and soon loses interest in the other, but works hard enough to get passing grade.
- Meets Carey Kawaye, his future wife, when she takes a summer job at Art Fair.
- Begins working from slides and, for the rest of his life, makes paintings based on photographic images. Takes slides of baseball cards he has collected, projects them on Masonite, cuts out Masonite so that positions of figures extend beyond the rectangular format. These works are done in acrylic.
- 1973 Takes baseball card paintings to Clark Polak Gallery in Los Angeles. Polak agrees to hang one, which sells.
- Wilf pools his money to buy a Richard McLean print from Polak and is disappointed that he has to leave it at the gallery until the end of a show.
- Polak invites Wilf to participate in "New Realism II," a group exhibition. Shows portrait, enlarged from a slide, of Carey spraying her long, dark hair. Her angular position and the flow of her hair make a dynamic shape, crisply differentiated from a flat, light ground.
- Meets artist Dan Douke, who becomes a lifelong friend. Impresses Douke as an extraordinarily serious artist, well informed about art on the East Coast and in Europe: "There was a rawness and an honesty about him that appealed to me, but he was definitely not naive about art. He had a voracious appetite for information about artists, dealers, galleries, publications, and exhibitions. He had catalogues and he knew names of all the Photorealists in New York."
- 1974 Develops strong interest in Photorealist work of Franz Gertsch through reproductions in magazines and acquires print by him.
- Works in earnest on portraits of family and friends. Takes dozens of slides, often with flash to accentuate shadows, then chooses one image for a painting. Sometimes shoots foreground and background separately in order to fuse images in focus. Tells parents he wants "nothing unnatural" in their clothing or poses and remains true to photographic images except for occasional changes of color and pattern on clothes and upholstery.
- For each painting, projects image on canvas and sketches it, then puts slide in projection box as reference for color and detail. Underpaints, building layers and refining as he goes.
- Listens to country and western music while he works and gets ideas for titles of paintings from songs: "*Turn Back the Pages of Time*"; "*She Doesn't Know Just What to Do*"; "*Another Place, Another Time*."
- Portraits of this period are of somber people seated on couches, singly or in pairs. Rendered with growing authority and in ever-increasing detail, these paintings of long-haired young men and middle-aged people with leathery faces confront the viewer, their ordinary appearances scrupulously observed by the camera's unflinching eye.
- Wilf travels to Europe with parents. Sees art museums in London, Paris, and Amsterdam and searches out contemporary art on his own. Finds work by Malcolm Morley, Richard Estes, Ben Schonezeit, and other Photorealists.
- On a visit to Los Angeles, curator Marcia Tucker goes to Wilf's studio and invites him to participate in the "1975 Biennial Exhibition: Contemporary American Art" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- 1975 Shows portraits concurrently in Whitney Biennial and "Portrait Painting 1970-75" at Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York. Goes to see both shows. Upon returning home, talks to Douke about "how many people were working in that [Photorealist] style." Douke recalls, "We were beginning to think we had said everything we wanted to say and that it was time to move on."
- Continues to produce tightly painted portraits, but is impressed by Malcolm Morley's transition from Photorealism to more expressionistic work. When Douke becomes gallery director at California State University, Los Angeles, he asks Wilf what show he would most like to bring to the gallery if he could choose. "I would love to see a Malcolm Morley show," Wilf replies.
- Shows four portraits in "4 x 8 + 4 x 4" exhibition at Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach. Writes catalogue statement: "I have tried to paint likenesses of those around me—family, friends, and other artists. I believe that for me painting people is a way back to subject matter as human relationships promise freedom and variety."
- Has first solo show, at Comsky Gallery, Beverly Hills.
- Corresponds often with Udo Kultermann, author of *New Realism* (c. 1972), who negotiates sale of a painting through slides. Also writes to Linda Chase, author of *Hyperrealism* (1975), who encourages Wilf but advises him to get rid of "funny titles" based on songs. He begins to call works *Portrait of...*
- 1976 Shows five portraits in "Five Realists" exhibition at Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles. Writes catalogue statement: "If the work doesn't hold up under the close scrutiny of the viewer, then nothing I could say could redeem it."



Judged, 1980

Strikes up close friendship with artist D. J. Hall, who also is painting people based on photographic images.

Becomes affiliated with Albert Contreras Gallery, Hollywood, where he meets artists Victor Lance Henderson, Michael Wasp, Cynthia Kelly, and Charles Christopher Hill. Hill arranges for a show of Wilf's portraits at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art the following year. Hill recalls that Wilf "was refining a technique and really enjoying it at that time. He had great facility and each painting was, in fact, better than the one before."

On July 24, marries Carey with Douke as best man. Carey, who has been teaching art since 1975, continues to do so to support Wilf. They move into a large, impeccably decorated but inexpensive studio in a former Moose Lodge in Huntington Park. Wilf paints in a dark bar area, which suits his method of using a projection box.

Has solo show of portraits at Contreras Gallery, Hollywood.

Drives to La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art with Douke to see "Richard Artschwager, Chuck Close, Joe

Zucker." Is particularly taken with Zucker's eccentric imagery and textured materials.

1977 Spends six weeks helping D. J. Hall paint a 16-by-50-foot billboard, using her image of two women in a swimming pool and her hot, saturated palette. They are both forced to work much larger and looser than before to make the billboard, which is installed at the corner of La Cienega and Santa Monica boulevards during February. While working with Hall, Wilf discusses ideas for new ways of painting.

Back in his studio, paints four portraits (of himself, Carey, and his parents) in a relatively loose style. Exhibits them with tighter paintings in second solo show at Contreras Gallery.

1978 Continuing to loosen his brushwork, draws and paints himself breathing with asthma inhaler.

Carey takes photographs of him getting a permanent wave in a hair salon. He projects them on paper, manipulating the material to get an undulating distortion,

then completes them in ink line and wash in a series called *Wash, Rinse and Set*. Faces in these drawings grin devilishly and are stretched horizontally into wavy forms.

Moves into downtown Los Angeles building on South Broadway that houses Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), office of *High Performance* magazine, and studios of performance artists. Occupies Charles Christopher Hill's former studio.

Projects slides on tilted canvases in order to distort portrait images. Colors become brighter and more acidic.

Becomes an increasingly public figure, often seen at art openings and well known to artists as a fun-loving if cynical man given to violent outbursts and brushes with the law when under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Describes youthful escapades with gangs and narcotics and a childhood partly shaped by his family's Mormon values. Shows friends drawings done while jailed on drug charges and tells of trading drawings of nude girls to inmates in exchange for cigarettes. Wilf's behavior becomes more erratic and volatile but he remains coherent in discussions about his art.

1979

Accepts teaching post at Arizona Western College in Yuma as an artist-in-residence. While there, paints portrait of Carey with mixture of wax and acrylic as a first move in building textured surfaces. Is terminated before end of three-month appointment due to aggressive and unruly behavior.

Back in Los Angeles, uses wax and acrylic to paint a series of portraits of punk musicians.

Shows new distorted portraits in "Portraits 1979" at Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, along with book of photographs of older work. Among new paintings are portraits of people with ghoulish, grimacing, howling faces. Tall, vertical self-portrait features a laughing Wilf as if seen in a fun-house mirror.

Has little interest in performance art but is intrigued by photographs of performances involving themes of violence and death in *High Performance* magazine. Using wax and acrylic and a predominantly gray palette, paints images of performance artists from slides of these black-and-white photographs. Among subjects are Hermann Nitsch drinking blood (*Sacrifice*); Barbara Smith as a white-hooded figure whose head resembles a skull (*Judged*); Stephen Seemayer's performance with fire (*Burning Desire*); and Rudolf Schwarzkogler tied up with strips of cloth (*Bound Figure*). These are cropped, large, terrifying figures, easily readable but with painterly surfaces.

1980

Makes paintings based on slaughtered animals at butcher shop in Grand Central Market, across the street from his downtown studio. Takes slides of carcasses and animal heads and has extremely lengthy sessions projecting them repeatedly to select images to paint.

Begins to paint from color xerox prints made from slides. Continues to project slides on canvas to establish initial drawing but stops using projection box. This allows him to work in brighter light and to refer to a crude, less detailed image. Using a predominantly red palette, adds paper pulp to wax and acrylic for rougher texture, as a means of opposing Photorealism's slick surfaces.

Subjects of this period include piles of carcasses, animal heads with oddly smiling mouths and eyes that seem alive. Paintings portray a crush of flayed flesh and carnage that speaks of gluttony and greed; swirling forms crowd against each other. Wilf later puts molding around some of these canvases to evoke butchers' tables.

Future dealer Ulrike Kantor sees paintings of meat in Wilf's studio during tour sponsored by LACE. Later meets him and follows progress of his art.

1981

Buys animal heads and fish from market and sets up still lifes combining them with objects such as fruit, a silver bowl, and his own white boots. Although still continuing to work from photographs, he arranges his objects in a traditional manner and paints careful compositions reminiscent of 17th-century art.

Shows at Ulrike Kantor's recently opened gallery in West Hollywood. Exhibits meat paintings and a few earlier works and receives positive critical response.

When informed that his meat paintings have an affinity to Soutine's work, begins to look at Soutine reproductions.

"Andy believed in those early [Photorealist] paintings, but he had done what he could do," says Victor Lance Henderson, commenting on Wilf's change from meticulous realism to expressionism. "He lost interest in that kind of detached mode. It was not an easy transition. It was not sensationalism. It was too hard to arrive at. Had he picked Soutine as a role model, he could have done it in one afternoon."

Wins Modern and Contemporary Art Council's Young Talent Purchase Award at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Announcement at ceremony at China Club brings enthusiastic, emotional response from fellow artists.

Tells Ulrike Kantor he will do 30 new paintings for show planned for May 1982, but in subsequent months produces few.

Two charges—for being under the influence of narcotics and for assault—are filed against him and set for disposition in late January 1982.

1982

Dies January 17, at age 32, while sleeping at a friend's house in Malibu. Coroner's report says death is accidental and attributes it to multiple drug intoxication due to overdose.



Peace Through Chemistry, 1981

Checklist

Bound Figure, 1979

Acrylic and wax on canvas

90 × 122 in.

The Robert Gore Rifkind Foundation, Beverly Hills, California

Judged, 1980*

Acrylic and wax on canvas

90 × 136 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Modern and

Contemporary Art Council, Young Talent Purchase Award

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Dead Ends, 1980

Acrylic and wax on canvas

90 × 122 in.

Martin von Haselberg

Keep Your Eyes Peeled, Be on Your Toes, 1980

Acrylic and wax on canvas, hibachi, and papier-mâché

Triptych: 63¼ × 17½ in.; 54 × 40½ in.; 63¼ × 17½ in.

Sue and Steve Antebi

Chilled to the Bone, 1980

Acrylic and wax on canvas

Diptych: each panel 48 × 18 in.

Larry Gagosian

Scared Stiff, 1980

Acrylic and wax on canvas

30 × 24 in.

Dr. Richard Thiel and Dr. Ann Thiel

Spring Buffet, 1981

Acrylic and wax on canvas

48 × 66 in.

Aviva and Carl Covitz

Active Ingredients, 1981

Acrylic and wax on canvas

66 × 87 in.

Ulrike Kantor Gallery

Peace Through Chemistry, 1981

Acrylic and wax on canvas

60 × 45½ in.

Ulrike Kantor Gallery



Photograph of Andy Wilf used as a study for *Peace Through Chemistry*

*This work is presently on view in the "Young Talent Awards: 1963-1983" exhibition

Solo Exhibitions

- 1981 Ulrike Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles
 1980 Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions
 1977 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art
 Albert Contreras Gallery, Hollywood
 1976 Albert Contreras Gallery, Hollywood
 1975 Comsky Gallery, Beverly Hills

Group Exhibitions

- 1983 "Drawings by Painters," Long Beach Museum of Art (traveled to Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego; and The Oakland Museum) (cat.)
 1982 "Body Language," University Art Gallery, San Diego State University (cat.)
 "Figuration," University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara (cat.)
 "4 Los Angeles Painters," Pasadena City College
 1981 "Group Show," Ulrike Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles
 "New Fauve Painting," Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles
 "A Sense of Individualism," L.A. Louver, Gallery, Venice
 1980 "Mask as Metaphor," Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles
 "On and Off Broadway," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions
 "We Are Very Kind," Vanguard Gallery, Los Angeles
 1979 "Portraits 1979," Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery
 1978 "Figurative Realism 1978," Occidental College, Los Angeles
 "Realist Painting, Los Angeles," ARCO Center for Visual Art, Los Angeles
 1977 "Artists' Mask Invitational," Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles
 "The Figure in Contemporary Realism," Cedars Sinai Hospital, Los Angeles
 "100+ Current Directions in Southern California Art," Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art
 1976 "Five Realists," Fine Arts Gallery, Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles (cat.)
 1975 "4 x 8 + 4 x 4," Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach (cat.)
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- 1973 "New Realism," Clark Polak Gallery, Los Angeles

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